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Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Summary

The present report is submitted to the General Assembly pursuant to its resolution 69/157 on the rights of the child, in which it requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports to the Assembly on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate and on the progress achieved in advancing the children and armed conflict agenda. The report covers the period from August 2014 to July 2015. It describes trends, select issues of concern and progress made over the past year, including the mainstreaming of child protection issues within the United Nations system. It also provides information on the field visits of the Special Representative, on her engagement with regional organizations and international partners and on dialogue with parties to conflict. It outlines a number of challenges and priorities in her agenda and concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the protection of children affected by conflict.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 69/157, the General Assembly requested the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to continue to submit reports on the activities undertaken in the fulfilment of her mandate, including information on her field visits, progress made and challenges faced on the children and armed conflict agenda. The request stemmed from the mandate given by the Assembly in its resolution 51/77, in which it recommended that the Special Representative raise awareness and promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by armed conflict, and that the Special Representative foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children's rights in such situations. In line with that mandate, and as requested by the Assembly in its resolution 69/157, the present report provides an update on the "Children, not soldiers" campaign. It also highlights progress made over the past year and outlines the immediate priorities, as well as a longer-term vision, to advance the children and armed conflict agenda in collaboration with Member States, United Nations entities, regional and subregional organizations and civil society.

II. Taking stock of the children and armed conflict agenda

A. Overview of trends and challenges

2. The reporting period was marked by acute periods of violence that added to existing challenges from protracted conflicts. Cyclical spikes and unrelenting violence have resulted in widespread grave violations against children in nearly all situations on the children and armed conflict agenda. In many situations, conflicts continued to be characterized by extreme violence and sectarian, religious or ethnic divisions. In a number of countries, intense armed conflicts took place in dense urban environments, leading to a significant loss of life among children. Such conflicts have challenged the response capacity of national authorities and the international community.

3. Extreme violence was a prevalent feature of conflicts in 2014 and continued into 2015. That lead to a dramatic increase in grave violations against children, who were disproportionately affected and were often the direct targets of acts of violence intended to cause maximum civilian casualties, terrorize entire communities and provoke outrage worldwide. Schools in particular were targeted by extremist groups. In many situations, the regional or international responses to security threats have also posed child protection challenges.

4. In the latter part of the reporting period, a number of situations deteriorated significantly, with those in South Sudan and Yemen worsening to a significant degree. In South Sudan, an already dire situation, which followed the eruption of conflict in December 2013, deteriorated even further. In a period of only three weeks in May 2015, approximately 130 children from Unity State were killed, with reports indicating that they had been subjected to brutal sexual violence and/or killed based on their ethnicity or had been recruited and used. In Yemen, heavy aerial bombardments since the end of March 2015 have dramatically increased the number of child casualties in an already highly precarious environment. All parties to the

conflict on the ground in Yemen have engaged in widespread child recruitment since the conflict intensified.

5. Incidents of abduction of children rose significantly and were perpetrated increasingly on a wide scale by extremist groups. In Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, for instance, more than 1,000 girls and boys were abducted by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In one incident in Aleppo, Syrian Arab Republic, ISIL abducted approximately 150 young boys on their way home after their school exams. The abductions were in addition to the numerous mass abductions committed by Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), more commonly known as Boko Haram, in north-eastern Nigeria over the past few years. Many other parties to conflict also committed abductions, including in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Sudan.

6. The information gathered by the Office of the Special Representative, through the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, informed and galvanized international action on abductions during the reporting period. The data received demonstrate an increase in the frequency and scale of abductions, which has resulted in greater protection needs for children. The children require safe release, family tracing and medical and psychosocial assistance, and the facilitation of voluntary repatriation in the context of cross-border abductions.

7. The violations committed against children affected by conflict were compounded by sexual violence reportedly committed by foreign troops or peacekeepers in a number of situations of armed conflict. Grave violations against children by those entrusted to protect the population are particularly egregious; the perpetrators should be held to account.

8. The impact of conflict continued to be felt by children long after the most severe violence had subsided. Children were deprived of adequate services and shelter, and suffered the long-term physical and psychological scars of conflict. In Gaza, one year after the conflict, children's access to education, health care, and water and sanitation services remained hampered. Delays in the rebuilding of destroyed schools and homes constrained access by children to education, and some 100,000 people remained displaced. In the Central African Republic, thousands of children were still associated with parties to conflict, despite a few hundred having been released during the reporting period, in particular after the signature of a commitment by armed groups on 5 May 2015. Child protection actors on the ground face the ongoing challenge of receiving and assisting hundreds of children at short notice, as the mobilization of expertise and funding is required once political commitments have been gained.

9. The challenges outlined above notwithstanding, the present report highlights important new initiatives undertaken by the Special Representative and other child protection actors to improve the well-being of children living through conflict. Encouragingly, progress has been achieved: thousands of children have been released by parties to conflict; commitments have been issued by non-State armed groups; and agreements have been concluded with Governments on the handover of children separated from armed groups.

B. Emerging issues and challenges

New protection challenges posed by extreme violence

10. During the reporting period, extreme violence rose to an unprecedented level. The impact on children has multiplied in a number of countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and the Syrian Arab Republic. Children were victims of grave violations and were often forced to witness or take part in beheadings, immolations and summary executions. They were also indoctrinated, recruited and forced to be suicide bombers or human shields. Girls were subjected to additional abuses, including sexual slavery, abduction and forced marriage. The violations often took place in the context of mass abductions. Such brutal tactics had severe repercussions on children, which will have lasting effects for generations to come.

11. Extremist groups have benefited from advances in technology, which have facilitated their rapid growth and led to the expansion of their territorial control, often across national borders. The military response to the threat has also raised protection challenges for children. Children caught in the middle of counter-terrorism operations have been killed and maimed and their homes and schools destroyed. In some cases, State-allied militias have been mobilized, resulting in boys and sometimes girls being used in support roles and even as combatants. Despite international calls for due process and respect for the rule of law, counter-terrorism operations often lack those elements. The Special Representative recalls that efforts to counteract extremist groups must be carried out in full compliance with international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law and must ensure that children are treated primarily as victims.

12. Prevention must complement any legal or military action to counteract extreme violence. Action is required by the international community, regional organizations and individual Member States to mobilize resources to build resilience and strengthen protective environments for children. Identifying and addressing the root causes and catalysts of extremism, such as poverty and the alienation of communities, is a necessary first step in the effort to find a lasting solution. Extremist groups also regularly recruit young people and children from around the world using propaganda on the Internet and social media. This is a new and compounding challenge, and is complex for Member States to address. The Special Representative notes that attention should be given to the recruitment networks of extremist groups, with the aim of preventing the recruitment of children in the first place. Education is one tool that can reduce the appeal of extremist groups and help to prevent social exclusion and promote respect for human rights, peace and diversity.

13. The reintegration of children associated with extremist groups poses challenges. Indoctrination and trauma from exposure to extreme violence make it more difficult for children to reintegrate into their former communities. The Special Representative calls upon the international community to prioritize developing specialized reintegration programmes to address the psychological harm experienced by children who are exposed to extreme violence.

Children deprived of liberty in situations of armed conflict

14. The deprivation of liberty of children owing to their actual or alleged association with armed groups is a concern in nearly all country situations covered

by the Special Representative's mandate. It is particularly worrisome that the number of children arrested and detained in the context of counter-terrorism operations has increased significantly. In such contexts, but also in more traditional conflict settings, children are no longer seen as victims but are treated as security threats. In many cases, they are either held under the authority of military actors or are handed over to national security agencies that deprive them of their liberty for long periods. Children associated with parties to conflict should be treated as victims and handed over to child protection actors. In circumstances in which children are accused of a crime, any legal process should be conducted in compliance with due process and juvenile justice standards. Accordingly, the detention of children should always be a last resort, for the shortest time possible and guided by the best interests of the child. Those principles apply to any form of deprivation of liberty, be it detention under security charges, administrative detention or deprivation of liberty for the child's own protection or rehabilitation.

15. In order to ensure the adequate treatment of children separated from armed groups, the Special Representative advocated with the Member States concerned for standard operating procedures for the handover of children to child protection actors. In September 2014, the United Nations and the Government of Chad signed a protocol on the handover of children, which included specific provisions regulating detention. Those standard operating procedures build on previous agreements signed with the Governments of Mali, Somalia and Uganda in recent years. Child protection provisions have also been included in the concept of operations of the Multinational Joint Task Force to fight Boko Haram/JAS. The Special Representative encourages all Member States to develop such standard operating procedures where applicable to prevent the detention of children and protect their primary status as victims.

16. The Special Representative continued to advocate for the strengthening of legal frameworks to ensure the protection of children deprived of their liberty in times of conflict. To that end, the Special Representative participated in the consultation on the right to challenge the lawfulness of detention before courts, which was organized by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in Geneva in September 2014. The Office of the Special Representative also contributed to the draft basic principles and guidelines that the Working Group will submit to the Human Rights Council in 2015. The Special Representative anticipates that the documents will provide important guidance on addressing the issue of the detention of children in armed conflict.

17. The Special Representative welcomes General Assembly resolution 69/157 on the rights of the child, in which the Assembly invited the Secretary-General to commission an in-depth global study on children deprived of liberty. Her Office has taken part in the initial phase of and continues to contribute to the study, in close cooperation with relevant United Nations agencies and offices outlined in the resolution.

Rights to education and health in situations of armed conflict

18. The General Assembly has recognized that attacks on education and health-care facilities deprive millions of children of their rights to healthy lives and to learn and realize their potential. This not only has an immediate impact on children, but also affects the future prospects of societies. In line with its recent debates and resolutions on education in emergencies and attacks on medical facilities, the Assembly welcomed the issuance of the guidance note entitled "Protect schools and hospitals:

end attacks on education and health care" in May 2014, which was co-produced by the Special Representative and other organizations of the United Nations system. In her own efforts to promote the guidance note, the Special Representative attended a workshop on the protection of schools and hospitals in January 2015 in Berlin at the invitation of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Prevention of the violation of the rights to education and health was also supported by the Security Council through its resolutions 1998 (2011), 2143 (2014) and 2225 (2015), in which the Council urged all parties to conflict to respect the civilian character of schools and to refrain from actions that impeded children's access to education and health care.

19. The accountability of those who attack schools and hospitals is a key aspect of prevention. The Special Representative appreciates the importance conferred to the protection of education and health of children by Member States and reiterates her call to them to consider, where needed, changes in national policies, military procedures and legislation. Those who deliberately target schools and hospitals must be investigated and prosecuted.

20. In its resolution 2225 (2015), the Security Council also encouraged Member States to take concrete measures to deter the military use of schools by armed forces and armed groups. In that regard, the Special Representative welcomes the adoption by 37 countries of the Safe Schools Declaration on 29 May 2015, which endorsed the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. An additional 10 countries have adopted the Declaration since its launch. Although the Guidelines are not legally binding, they highlight good practice for all parties to conflict and aim to provide guidance to reduce the impact of armed conflict on education, particularly in relation to military use.

21. The Special Representative underlines the continuing importance of efforts to protect education in conflict situations, such as the dedication of the Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai, the work of the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, the No Lost Generation initiative by the United Nations and its partners for children affected by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Oslo Summit on Education for Development, the Incheon Declaration, the planned data hub project by Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict on global attacks on education, and the Children of Peace initiative of the European Union. With 39 million children and adolescents deprived of education owing to conflict and internal and cross-border displacement, however, those efforts are only a small step towards the goal of safeguarding universal education for those affected by conflict.

22. Ensuring access to education and health care for children in conflict and for displaced children must be a priority. The General Assembly will be endorsing the sustainable development goals at its seventieth session. In the implementation of the goals, the Special Representative urges Member States to prioritize addressing the impact of conflict on the rights of children to education and health.

III. Dialogue, commitments and action plans with parties to conflict: update on the "Children, not soldiers" campaign

23. The "Children, not soldiers" campaign was launched in March 2014 jointly with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with the goal of ending the

recruitment and use of children by government forces by the end of 2016. Support for the campaign by Member States, regional organizations, United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and civil society partners has been strong. Seven of the eight Governments listed in the annexes to the annual reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for recruitment and use of children have signed or recommitted to action plans with the United Nations. Only the Government of the Sudan is yet to sign an action plan, but discussions with the United Nations are ongoing.

24. The signature of an action plan is the first step towards delisting; it must be followed by the separation and release of children associated with armed forces or groups and the implementation of measures to prevent further recruitment of children. Ending impunity for those who commit grave violations is also a crucial part of efforts to protect children from recruitment and use. Children separated from parties to conflict also require reintegration into their families and communities, which needs a long-term financial commitment. The first year of the campaign resulted in progress through the delisting of the Chadian National Army and notable advances in the implementation of the action plans in other countries.

25. The Special Representative undertook a number of initiatives to galvanize support and action for the goals of the campaign. In New York in September 2014, at the invitation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Special Representative moderated a ministerial level round table on the margins of the General Assembly to share experiences and discuss the next steps in the implementation of the campaign. Also in September 2014, the Office of the Special Representative and UNICEF collaborated with a number of non-governmental organizations to organize a one-day workshop on ways to support the campaign and the implementation of action plans at the national level.

26. In December 2014, the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights and Committee on Foreign Affairs held a special hearing on the campaign. The Special Representative briefed parliamentarians on the progress of the campaign and highlighted challenges and ways for the European Union to provide support. In Geneva, the Special Representative held a consultative workshop with the non-governmental organization Focus Group on Children Affected by Armed Conflict to take stock of the progress of the campaign and lessons learned in the countries concerned. The non-governmental organization was updated when the Special Representative travelled to Geneva in March 2015 to present her report to the Human Rights Council. In February 2015, two ambassadorial level luncheons were co-hosted with UNICEF and the Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to mobilize political support for the campaign among Member States. The campaign has also reached out to regional organizations to mobilize expertise, advocacy and capacity-building support.

27. The efforts to assist the implementation of the action plans complemented efforts of partners in the field and led to a significant reduction in verified cases of recruitment by listed national forces, in particular in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Myanmar. Each country took steps in developing the legal frameworks and structures to ensure the prohibition of and accountability for the recruitment and use of children in national forces.

28. In Afghanistan, a presidential decree criminalizing the recruitment of children under 18 years of age was ratified in the early part of 2015, and a directive

prohibiting the use of children, including in support roles, and outlining sanctions for perpetrators was issued and disseminated. Pilot child protection units in the national police in four provinces also reportedly prevented more than 400 children from enlisting, indicating the potential for considerable impact if such units are replicated across the country. Expanding the pilot child protection units to other areas was highlighted to the Government of Afghanistan in July 2015 on the basis of the most recent report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan (S/2015/336).

29. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite security challenges, the Government consistently demonstrated its commitment with regard to the implementation of the action plan signed with the United Nations in 2012 to end the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children. Efforts included funding and chairing joint coordination mechanisms and ensuring their decentralization to conflict-affected provinces. The President also nominated a personal adviser on sexual violence and child recruitment. Moreover, a newly promulgated amnesty law excluded the crimes of recruitment of children and sexual violence from amnesty. Progress is also being made on the fight against impunity, with the arrest, prosecution and sentencing of high ranking perpetrators of grave violations against children.

30. In Myanmar, the implementation of the action plan has resulted in the release of hundreds of child recruits from the armed forces of Myanmar (Tatmadaw). The collaboration between the United Nations and the Government includes regular reviews, training sessions and increased monitoring access to Tatmadaw facilities. Despite the progress, children continue to be found in the Tatmadaw's ranks and are sometimes deployed to the front line.

31. As outlined in the previous report to the General Assembly (A/69/212), the delisting of the Armée nationale tchadienne was another important milestone for the campaign. The protection of children requires ongoing efforts, however, particularly in the light of the role of Chad in the Multinational Joint Task Force. For instance, the Government of Chad, the United Nations and non-governmental organization partners are still working to address long-term needs regarding the establishment of a universal birth registration system, the adoption of a child protection law and measures to institutionalize age verification processes.

32. Despite the progress in the campaign highlighted above, in Yemen and South Sudan the intensification of conflict reversed previous gains and presented serious challenges for future engagement.

33. It is important to highlight that the achievements of the campaign to end the recruitment of children in government forces will also help in addressing recruitment and use by non-State armed groups. Of the 49 non-State armed groups in the annexes to the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/69/926-S/2015/409), 32 are present in the seven remaining campaign countries. As noted above, the aim of the campaign is to assist the Member States concerned in developing their legal frameworks, including the criminalization of the recruitment of children, and to provide their national institutions with tools and mechanisms to build capacity, which can be used to address and respond to violations by non-State armed groups.

IV. Addressing grave violations by non-State armed groups

34. The Special Representative has consistently sought to engage with all parties to conflict, including non-State armed groups, which continue to constitute the majority of parties (49 of the 57 parties) listed in the most recent annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for grave violations against children. It is critical that any efforts to advance the children and armed conflict agenda seek to engage with this diverse group of actors. To that end, a multifaceted approach is necessary, taking into consideration the different operational environments.

35. The majority of extremist groups have no interest in engaging with national and international actors, which limits the possibilities to address violations and protect children. The identification of entry points to apply political and financial pressure through the international community, including Member States, is therefore a vital first step. International instruments such as sanctions are another avenue for addressing violations committed against children by extremist groups.

36. In that context, it is crucial to interact with non-State armed groups that are willing to engage on the issue of child protection and to convince them to fulfil their obligations under international law. The Special Representative requests that the Governments concerned facilitate cooperation between the United Nations and those non-State armed groups, in accordance with the principle outlined in Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) that it does not prejudge their legal status.

37. In many instances, engagement with non-State armed groups has led to commitments and actions by those groups to end violations, in particular child recruitment within their ranks, and some have signed action plans with the United Nations. In the reporting period, progress was achieved with the Cobra faction of the South Sudan Democratic Army, which released more than 1,700 children. That followed a meeting between the Special Representative and the leader of the Cobra Faction, David Yau Yau, during the Special Representative's visit to South Sudan in June 2014, and further efforts in the field by UNICEF. More recently, in May 2015, the Special Representative participated in consultations in Austria on children and armed conflict with representatives of the Justice and Equality Movement, the Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid and the Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minawi, which are listed in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict for the recruitment and use of children in the Sudan. Thanks to joint efforts with the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur and the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, the leaders of the three groups signed a joint statement on the situation of children in Darfur, in which they accepted responsibility for the protection of children and pledged to end and prevent grave violations against them. During her visit to Myanmar in July 2015, the Special Representative entered into dialogue with the Kachin Independence Army, the Karen National Liberation Army and the Karenni Army, which are listed for engaging in the recruitment and use of children. She had productive discussions with the groups with regard to action plans to end and prevent child recruitment and use and other grave violations.

Entry points in mediation and peace processes with non-State armed groups

38. Political dialogue, and peace and ceasefire negotiations represent unique opportunities to reach out to parties to conflict, particularly non-State armed groups,

and to advocate for the protection of children. Children, who often form such a large proportion of populations in conflict situations, bear the brunt of conflict; the early consideration of their protection needs in discussions and negotiations is therefore important.

39. Engagement with parties to conflict on issues such as the separation, release and handover of children can provide a starting point in discussions and offer a unique common denominator for parties in otherwise difficult or protracted negotiations. Moreover, the inclusion of child protection provisions in ceasefire and peace agreements helps in anticipating and planning resource requirements for the reintegration of children.

40. In a positive development, many Member States acknowledged those aspects during an open debate of the Security Council on the theme of protecting children from non-State armed groups, hosted by France in March 2015. Recommendations made during the debate were for a more systematic inclusion of child protection provisions in all peace and ceasefire agreements, including those relating to the unconditional release and reintegration of children. The recommendations were collected in a non-paper shared by France with the Secretary-General in June 2015 (A/69/918-S/2015/372, annex). Some Member States also requested that a guidance note for mediators and special envoys be developed, which the Office of the Special Representative stands ready to support.

41. In that spirit, during the reporting period the Special Representative communicated with the international mediators of the inter-Malian dialogue hosted by Algeria. She advocated for the integration of key child protection provisions in the final peace agreement, particularly as part of the security arrangements and on aspects relating to justice, reconciliation and accountability. In particular, she highlighted critical aspects of child protection for the separation, release and reintegration of children associated with the Malian armed groups involved in the dialogue and called for stronger wording in the accountability section. Although the final wording still lacked critical aspects on child protection, awareness was raised and advocacy efforts continued. Engagement in the peace process complemented efforts of United Nations child protection actors on the ground to engage with some non-State armed groups, resulting in the signing of a local command order to stop and prevent all grave violations by the joint troops of the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad and the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad in September 2014.

42. On 5 and 6 May 2015, upon the invitation of the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Ejército del Pueblo, the Special Representative travelled to Havana to engage with parties to the Colombian peace process. The peace talks, which were facilitated by Cuba and Norway, were launched in August 2012 with the aim of ending nearly five decades of conflict. Following sustained advocacy by the Special Representative, the United Nations and non-governmental organizations, the negotiating parties have committed to address children's issues as a confidence-building measure. Discussions are under way to take further steps to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, as well as to release and reintegrate children currently associated with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Ejército del Pueblo. In that regard, the Special Representative welcomes the announcement in June 2015 of the release of children under 15 years of age by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de

Colombia — Ejército del Pueblo and looks forward to the swift implementation of their release and to further progress to ensure the separation of all children.

43. In the Central African Republic, the Brazzaville Agreement of July 2014 offered another example of how the implementation of a cessation of hostilities agreement can open space to engage parties to conflict on child protection issues. Following the Agreement, United Nations leadership and child protection actors intensified their engagement with non-State armed groups, which resulted in the adoption of command orders to prohibit the recruitment and use of children by two ex-Séléka factions, namely, the Rassemblement patriotique pour le renouveau de Centafrique and the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique. As the political process was going on, the United Nations used an opening in the lead-up to the Bangui Forum for the signature of a commitment by 11 armed groups and factions from ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka on 5 May 2014 to stop and prevent the recruitment and use of children, as well as other grave violations against children. As at July 2015, a number of the armed groups are in the process of discussing action plans with the United Nations, and several hundred children have been released.

44. An action plan agreed between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the United Nations on the issue of the recruitment and use of child soldiers was signed in 2009 and renewed in 2013. Progress on the implementation of the action plan has been steady, with the Government of the Philippines facilitating access for the United Nations. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front increased its engagement and conducted repeated information sessions on ending child recruitment with members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces. In parallel, planning for a communications campaign, as identified in the action plan, continued with the aim of sensitizing the community on the involvement of children in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front also convened in April 2015 to discuss its role in preventing the recruitment and use of children by armed groups in communities. The United Nations continued to support and assist the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, utilizing political momentum as the peace negotiations continued. The Government has also improved the legal framework regarding grave violations against children, which will apply to all parties to conflict in the Philippines.

V. Raising global awareness and mainstreaming

A. Field visits

45. Field visits remain a central aspect of the Special Representative's activities because they provide an important opportunity to engage directly with parties to conflict, government officials, the diplomatic community and civil society to pursue advocacy and mandate implementation. Field visits were complemented by other engagements outlined in the present report, which were undertaken in various countries to engage with parties to conflict or foster international cooperation to ensure respect for children's rights. During the reporting period, the Special Representative undertook field visits to Somalia (August 2014), Nigeria (January 2015) and Myanmar (July 2015).

Somalia

46. The Special Representative travelled to Mogadishu and Kismaayo from 16 to 20 August 2014, where she interacted with senior officials from the Federal Government of Somalia, the Interim Jubba Administration, the African Union Mission in Somalia and the United Nations. She stopped in Nairobi on 21 August to meet with Nairobi-based stakeholders, including the country task force on the monitoring and reporting mechanism. The objectives of her visit were to assess at first hand the impact of conflict on children and to follow up earlier discussions with Somali officials relating to the implementation of the two action plans on killing and maiming and on recruitment and use, both signed in 2012. She appreciated the commitment and efforts of the Federal Government of Somalia to protect children and the progress in the implementation of the action plans. She took the opportunity to call upon her interlocutors to take all measures necessary to minimize the impact of conflict and military operations on children, including responding to the threat posed by armed groups in line with international humanitarian and human rights law. She also advocated for the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocols thereto, particularly the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. She also engaged with the African Union Mission in Somalia leadership to enhance the protection of children in the context of military operations. In Mogadishu, the Special Representative visited the Serendi Rehabilitation Centre for disengaged combatants including children, particularly from Al-Shabaab. The Special Representative raised concerns regarding the lack of a clear and transparent legal framework concerning those held in the Centre and other similar centres in Somalia, particularly regarding the right to challenge the lawfulness of the deprivation of liberty. The Special Representative highlighted that children should only be deprived of their liberty as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible period of time. She called on the Federal Government of Somalia to ensure that children in the rehabilitation centres are handed over to child protection actors as soon as possible.

Nigeria

47. Following the inclusion of Nigeria as a new situation of concern on the children and armed conflict agenda, with the listing in 2014 of Boko Haram/JAS for killing and maiming and attacks on schools and hospitals, the Special Representative visited the country from 11 to 17 January 2015 to evaluate the impact of conflict in the north-east on children, support the roll-out of the monitoring and reporting mechanism and engage with the Nigerian authorities. The Special Representative also travelled to Yola, where she met with State authorities and internally displaced persons who had fled from attacks by Boko Haram/JAS.

48. The Government agreed to formalize collaboration with the United Nations on children and armed conflict through an interministerial committee in Abuja and decentralized committees in three conflict-affected states, and through the appointment of focal points at the federal and state levels. In her meetings with government and military officials, the Special Representative raised concerns relating to allegations of grave violations committed by the Nigerian defence and security forces, the "civilian joint task force" and other vigilante groups in the course of their operations against Boko Haram/JAS. Her interlocutors committed to investigate the allegations. Following a commitment made during her meeting with the Minister of Justice, a legal advisory was issued by the Government in January

2015, which reiterated the prohibition of the recruitment and use of children, including by the "civilian joint task force" and vigilante groups. Since her visit to Nigeria, the Special Representative has continued engagement and advocacy on her concerns regarding the protection of children, particularly in the context of operations against Boko Haram/JAS by individual neighbouring countries and by the Multinational Joint Task Force.

Myanmar

49. From 12 to 17 July 2015, the Special Representative undertook a visit to Myanmar focusing on the implementation of the joint action plan signed in 2012 to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the armed forces of Myanmar (Tatmadaw). She travelled to Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon, Mandalay and Myitkyina (Kachin State) and met with senior officials from the Government, the Tatmadaw and civil society. She had constructive dialogue on the remaining challenges to close the gaps and prevent child recruitment and use by the Tatmadaw. The Special Representative welcomed the release of 646 former child soldiers since the signature of the joint action plan, but stressed the need for proactive measures to prevent continuing underage recruitment. In particular, she called for the robust application of age assessment within the centralized military recruitment process, and for accountability through the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children by both military and civilian perpetrators. Another concern raised with the Government was the detention of child soldiers for alleged desertion from the Tatmadaw.

50. The Special Representative met with former child soldiers released by the Tatmadaw, who shared their experiences of the long-term physical and psychological impacts of underage recruitment and use. With the Government, she highlighted the need to address the root causes of child recruitment, including through increasing access to education and employment opportunities.

51. In her dialogue with both Government interlocutors and non-State armed groups, the Special Representative noted that, in the context of the ongoing peace process, addressing common concerns relating to the protection of children could be an entry point for building trust and de-escalating tensions between the parties. She also reminded the parties that immediate steps could be taken to release children from their ranks and end underage recruitment, even without a nationwide ceasefire agreement, which was under negotiation at the time of the visit.

B. Working with regional organizations

African Union

52. The Special Representative continued her engagement with the African Union throughout the reporting period. Her Office supported the development of the African Union workplan, which was approved in February 2015 to operationalize the declaration of intent signed in 2013. The workplan identifies core priorities to incorporate the issue of children and armed conflict into the work, policies, and decision-making of the African Union, with particular attention on capacity and knowledge management, support to State ratifications and compliance with African treaty bodies, and mainstreaming in the planning of African Union peace support operations. In addition, the Special Representative was invited to a high-level

retreat of the African Union in the United Republic of Tanzania in October 2014, which provided an opportunity to discuss the children and armed conflict agenda with senior African Union officials, with a specific focus on mediation.

European Union

53. The European Union remains an important partner, particularly in integrating the protection of children in conflict in the political and human rights dialogue. On 12 February 2015, the Special Representative and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, renewed their commitment to work together in a joint statement on ending the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. The Special Representative addressed the European Parliament on 3 December 2014, focusing on how better to protect children in armed conflict. In June 2015, her Office participated in training for the European External Action Service and diplomatic mission staff in Brussels on children and armed conflict, together with UNICEF.

League of Arab States

54. Building upon previous engagement with the League of Arab States, the Special Representative entered into a cooperation agreement with the League on 22 September 2014, marked by a signing ceremony with the Secretary-General of the League, Nabil El-Arabi, and the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. The aim of the agreement is to further strengthen the collaboration between the two entities, with a focus on ensuring the protection of children living in conflict-affected areas in the Arab world. In particular, the agreement seeks to enhance the capacity of the League to address issues pertaining to children and armed conflict across its areas of operation. The Office of the Special Representative and the Permanent Observer Mission of the League of Arab States to the United Nations developed a workplan in which immediate and long-term activities and joint engagement are outlined. The workplan articulates practical steps required to strengthen the internal capacity of the League, with the overall objective of adopting a strategy on the protection of children affected by armed conflict. The efforts are in line with General Assembly resolution 69/9 of 11 November 2014 on cooperation between the United Nations and the League of Arab States.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

55. The Special Representative continued to strengthen the partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to support the ongoing institutionalization of child protection. With that aim, her Office participated in a workshop in April 2015 that focused on using practical field experience to create training on the issue of children and armed conflict for current and future NATO deployments. The inclusion of a children and armed conflict advisor in the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan is also a welcome step that will improve the capacity of NATO troops and national authorities regarding children and armed conflict issues. In the Wales Summit Declaration of 5 September 2014, NATO reaffirmed its commitment to implement Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and further integrate the issue of children and armed conflict into the planning and conduct of its operations and missions and into its training, monitoring and reporting.

C. Building support on partnerships with United Nations mechanisms

56. In November 2014, the Special Representative addressed the General Assembly and other child protection stakeholders during the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, the Special Representative, jointly with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, worked to support the adoption by the Assembly of its resolution 69/293, in which it established 19 June as the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict.

57. During the reporting period three open debates of the Security Council on children and armed conflict took place, which resulted in the adopted of Council resolution 2225 (2015) and a non-paper issued by France on proposals for action to protect children from non-State armed groups (A/69/9180S/2015/372, annex). The Special Representative also briefed the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on specific country situations to ensure that members of the Council were kept abreast of latest developments pertaining to her mandate. During the 12-month period, country reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict were issued for Afghanistan (S/2015/336) and South Sudan (S/2014/884).

58. The Special Representative led the preparation of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/69/926-S/2015/409). During the reporting period, two reports were discussed in open debates of the Security Council, one in September 2014 covering the year 2013, and one in June 2015, covering the year 2014. The information in the latest report demonstrated a significant increase in incidents of abduction in 2014, with approximately 2,500 incidents perpetrated mostly by non-State armed groups, a significant increase from the approximately 550 abductions documented in the 2013 annual report (A/68/878-S/2014/339). The Special Representative worked with Member States, non-governmental organizations and members of the Council to highlight concerns about the increasing occurrence of abductions. That resulted in the unanimous adoption by the Council of its resolution 2225 (2015), co-sponsored by Malaysia and 55 other Member States, in which it expressed grave concern over the abduction of children in situations of armed conflict. The Council requested the Secretary-General to include in the annexes to his future reports on children and armed conflict those parties to armed conflict that engaged, in contravention of applicable international law, in patterns of abduction of children in situations of armed conflict.

59. The Special Representative also advocated for the inclusion of grave violations against children as designation criteria for sanctions, and engaged with Security Council sanctions committees in a number of country situations. She briefed the committees concerning the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in September 2014 and South Sudan in May 2015, providing information on grave violations committed against children in those situations.

60. The Special Representative was in regular communication with the Human Rights Council and various human rights mechanisms as key forums to help to raise awareness on and address violations of the rights of children in situations of conflict. In September 2014, at the invitation of the President of the Human Rights Council, the Special Representative briefed the Council on the situation of children

and armed conflict in Iraq during a special session. At the twenty-eighth session of the Human Rights Council, in March 2015, the Special Representative presented her annual report to the Council (A/HRC/28/54), in which she noted developments on accountability for grave violations against children and set out a series of recommendations to further the protection of children's rights. The Office of the Special Representative was actively involved in the implementation of the action plan and in the several work streams of the Secretary-General's Human Rights Up Front initiative.

61. The Special Representative also met with the Chair and members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to enhance information-sharing and encourage joint advocacy on children affected by armed conflict. The Special Representative continued to advocate ratification by Member States of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. In 2014, an additional seven States ratified the Optional Protocol, namely, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Saint Lucia and the State of Palestine. To date, the Optional Protocol has 129 signatories and 159 State parties. In December 2014, the Federal Parliament of Somalia adopted a law ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The law was signed by the President of Somalia on 20 January 2015. South Sudan also finalized the ratification of the Convention on 6 May 2015.

VI. Recommendations

62. The Special Representative calls upon Member States to protect children caught up in conflict in line with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, particularly in the context of counteracting terrorism and extremist groups.

63. Noting the progress made in the "Children, not soldiers" campaign, the Special Representative calls upon the countries concerned to galvanize their efforts to finalize the implementation of their action plans. She also notes with concern the deteriorating situation in a number of countries involved in the campaign, and calls upon their leaders to uphold earlier commitments to end the recruitment and use of children.

64. The Special Representative calls upon Member States to continue to facilitate United Nations access to and dialogue with non-State armed groups with a view to ending and preventing grave violations of children's rights. Particular attention should be given to the inclusion of child protection concerns in ceasefire and peace negotiations with non-State armed groups.

65. The Special Representative calls upon Member States to consider alternatives to the deprivation of liberty of children for their alleged or actual association with armed groups or as part of counter-terrorism measures. She calls upon Member States to treat children associated with armed groups primarily as victims and to ensure that the deprivation of liberty, for any purpose whatsoever, should be a last resort and for the shortest time possible.

66. Recalling that the issue of the reintegration of children is crucial to ensure the long-term sustainability of peace and security, the Special Representative encourages the Member States concerned to take appropriate measures to reintegrate those children, giving special attention to the needs of girls. She also calls on all Member

States to provide the necessary political, technical and financial support to reintegration programmes.

67. Noting that 2015 is the year that the sustainable development goals will be adopted, and noting with concern the increasing number of attacks on schools and hospitals, the Special Representative calls upon Member States to ensure that the rights to education and health are a cornerstone of efforts to protect children from conflict, and upon the General Assembly to continue to give due consideration to the issue in its resolutions on humanitarian and development issues.